

SAIGON PRODDED ON LAND REFORM

House Panel Finds Regime
Lags in Vital Programs

By FELIX BELAIR, Jr.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 3—A House committee issued a highly critical appraisal today of South Vietnamese and American efforts to enact "meaningful" land reform programs.

The Government Operations Committee said in a report to the Speaker of the House that "the record of the past 14 years provides scant hope that the Government of South Vietnam will institute a meaningful program of land reform in the near future."

Such a program, the report said, is unlikely unless American officials make "vigorous representations" and "the past record of the United States in this field has been little better than the record of the Government of South Vietnam."

The committee's report, based on months of investigation at the scene, made these points:

¶ "Perhaps more than any other single program, land reform offers the opportunity for the Government of Vietnam to secure the allegiance of the Vietnamese people, which is the ultimate objective of the entire range of activities known as the pacification program."

¶ "Authority for expropriation and rent control have been on the books for over a decade

Continued on Page 7, Column 1

but implementation has been ineffective or nonexistent. Less than 25 per cent of the land available to the Government has actually been distributed and a large percentage of this has gone for communal and public use rather than to individuals."

"Even granting recognition to the overwhelming administrative, political and security problems involved, it would seem that more substantial results than these are not only possible but necessary if land reform is to make its full contribution to the pacification effort."

"The failure of the Government of South Vietnam to demonstrate conclusively its sincere commitment to action in the field of land reform and a number of other essential programs could undermine the continuing support of the Congress and the U.S. people. This could raise the question of the advisability of continued U.S. involvement."

"Before substantial additional sums of U.S. money are committed for support of land reform in Vietnam, U.S. officials should explore with the Government of South Vietnam the merit of establishing a policy calling for the remission of rent for arable land, at least in certain areas, with appropriate compensation for landlords."

The essential point of the committee's report was that without effective land reform measures the present Saigon Government could probably not survive because the peasant farmers would not actively support it against the Vietcong in their areas.

Two Democratic members of the committee, Representatives John S. Monagan of Connecticut and L. H. Fountain of North Carolina, dissented on the ground that "the majority report fails entirely to place its findings and recommendations in the proper context of a Vietnam shattered and buffeted by war."

A third Democrat, Representative Porter Hardy Jr. of Virginia, asserted that the committee lacked jurisdiction for such an investigation which he said belonged with the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Backed by G.A.O. Report

Although backed by a secret report by the General Accounting Office documenting its findings, the committee report understated conclusions of individual members in an effort at unanimity.

Representative Ogden Reid of Westchester, N. Y., the ranking Republican member of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Freedom of Information, which originated the document, said in a statement that in addition to land reform it was necessary "to deal with corruption at all levels" in Vietnam — both in the central and provincial governments. Mr. Reid continued:

"Land reform in Vietnam, based on a G.A.O. report and extensive committee work, documents the failure of the Government of South Vietnam in this field. This record, with few exceptions, is characterized by pledges unsupported by consistent and major action meaningful to the peasant."

"The South Vietnamese peasant's feeling that he lacks a stake in his country, that he pays exorbitant rent to an absentee landlord, and that he does not own the land he tills will in no small part continue to be responsible for the deteriorating situation in the countryside."

"Further, any action to provide for and settle millions of refugees, including at least 600,000 who are homeless as a result of recent attacks, is in part dependent on land reform."

Mr. Reid, who went to South Vietnam last year with the subcommittee chairman, John Moss of California, said in his statement on the report it was already very late for the two governments to take corrective action on Vietnamese land reform.

But Mr. Reid said that the United States Government should strongly recommend that the Saigon government enact by executive decree "with such legislative steps as may be required:

¶ "Remission of all back rents for arable land, at least in most areas, with appropriate compensation for landlords."

¶ "Lowering the retention limit per family from 247 acres to 8 to 10 acres, in conjunction with a program of returning land to the tillers of the soil, where security permits, and with full and appropriate compensation to landlords."

The subcommittee completed its report on the land reform situation last October. But in the rush for adjournment it was not endorsed by the full committee.

Representatives Reid and Moss wrote Secretary of State Rusk at the time to explain the committee situation and demand that he correct foot-dragging by Washington and Saigon on land reform measures.

The Secretary replied by letter to both members that their information on land reform in South Vietnam was not "fully current."

Both members of Congress suggested today that they thought they were more current on the Vietnam land problem than was the Secretary or his staff.